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Perceptions of Students and Staff on Quality Assurance in the Departments of Mathematics, Statistics and Educational Studies in Zimbabwe Open University Midlands Region

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ABSTRACT

The issue of quality assurance has taken centre stage in most universities in the world in an endeavour to satisfy clients. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has not remained behind in this noble cause. It has established the quality assurance unit and is striving to obtain certification from the International Standards Organisation. Awareness on the institutionalization of a quality management system has been carried out throughout the various regions of the university. However, it would appear that very little is known on the perceptions of students and staff towards this quality management system. Consequently this study investigated the perceptions of both students and staff members of ZOU. It is believed that these perceptions are critical for support of the quality management system and will help successful implementation of the system. The study was delimited to the departments of Mathematics & Statistics and Educational Studies of the Midlands Region. Structured questionnaires and focus group discussions were the research techniques employed to gather data. Data obtained from the structured questionnaires were analysed using percentages while data from focus group discussions were analysed by establishing patterns. Results were triangulated to come up with conclusions and recommendations. It was recommended that all ZOU stakeholders should be included in the improvement and implementation of a quality management system leading to ownership of the system. ZOU should put in place organisational structures, processes and procedures that enhance quality and there is need for further research encompassing other departments and regions of ZOU.

Key words: quality assurance; perceptions; quality management system; service delivery; perception; open and distance education (ODL)

1. INTRODUCTION

The functions of any university include research, teaching and community service (Nherera, 2000). The university's roles therefore include acquisition, transmission and advancement of academic knowledge. The university should strive to promote scholarship and prepare students for leadership roles in their communities and as informed persons. Any university which intends to fulfil the stated roles needs some form of quality assurance of its processes and a strategy linked to the quality assurance processes and procedures (Gwarinda & Kurasha, 2011). Quality assurance is pertinent particularly to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities because the processes and procedures are undertaken at Regional Centres that are in dispersed places unlike in conventional universities. However, even conventional institutions now manage off-campus study centres but without the breadth and depth of ODL institutions. With a strategy linked to quality assurance processes and procedures, the university is likely to have an edge over its competitors.

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only local ODL university in Zimbabwe. ZOU opened its doors to the public as a fully fledged ODL university in 1999. Since then, it did not have a quality assurance unit up to 2007. In 2007, the quality assurance unit started operating with a director and two quality assurance officers (Gwarinda & Kurasha, 2011). By 2010, almost all ZOU regions had quality assurance units manned by officers.

ZOU's mission is to become a world class university by 2014 (ZOU Strategic Plan, 2010-2014). In this direction it applied in 2011 to obtain the International Standards Organisation (ISO) 9001-2008 certification. The ISO standard was chosen to align with the institution's vision of being a world class ODL university. The ZOU Quality Policy Manual outlines the university's core values as follows: to provide excellent services in the delivery of its mandate, to delight its customers, to continuously improve the products and services and its quality management system and to achieve its corporate objectives.

In order for the policy objectives to be realised, it implies that all involved in the processes and procedures of ZOU have to fulfil the above stated objectives and therefore need to have knowledge of the processes and procedures. There is also need for their inputs regarding the improvements of processes and procedures. It was against this background that the researchers felt there was need to find out the perceptions of tutors and students as stakeholders from the departments of Educational Studies as well as Mathematics and Statistics in the Midlands Region of the ZOU.

Furthermore, as the regional staff mix and mingle with students and tutors on a day to day basis, comments are passed about issues pertaining to quality assurance. Some comments touch on the availability of modules and the ability of students to tackle assignments. Part-time tutors point to quality issues of marking guides. The researchers were of the opinion that very little research had been conducted in the Midlands Region to establish the status of the quality of these issues.

While studies on aspects of quality assurance have been carried out in other ZOU regional centres like service delivery in Masvingo Region (Chabaya, Chadamoyo & Chiome, 2011), service delivery in ZOU regional centres (Zikhali, Mukeredzi, Weda & Nyamayaro, 2011), student retention as a function of the quality of learner support in ODL and students' perceptions at the ZOU (Chakuchichi, 2011), and quality issues in distance education in search of quality enhancers for part-time tutorship (Muguti & Mawere, 2013), no research in the Midlands Region in the particular departments have been undertaken. Some of the above researches were rather general.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As alluded to earlier, the institutionalisation of quality assurance in ZOU only began in 2007 and consequently research into the quality management system (QMS) is necessary to find out whether this intervention is bearing fruit. There appears to be minimum research and data regarding perceptions on the quality assurance in the ZOU Midlands Regional Centre from tutors and students. Tutors and students are part and parcel of the university and hence require to be heard on issues that would make the university obtain greater heights in terms of quality. If tutors and students are not involved they become alienated and quality will be affected.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of quality assurance has taken centre stage in most universities in the world, particularly those that endeavour to satisfy their clients and attain world class status. Barasa (2012) points out that there have been calls for African countries to prioritise and support distance education and e-learning by introducing quality assurance systems for distance and online education programmes. ZOU has not been left out in this endeavour as it introduced its quality management systems (ZQMS) in 2007 (Kurasha & Gwarinda, 2011).

The major aim of ODL is to provide education to all people deprived by poverty, place and time (Odeyemi, 2012). Since ODL learners face several challenges (Chirume, 2013; Simond, 2008), there is need to overcome the challenges or remove the "barriers in ODL" as Mnyanyi and Mbwette (2009) call them. ODL learners also need institutional identity to make them feel part of a recognised and accredited institution. Furthermore, the proliferation of online learning coupled with trans boarder education have created a need for accountability and the need to deal proactively with sub-standard service. All these factors have led ODL institutions to establish quality assurance systems in their departments.

According to Commonwealth of Learning & Asian Development Bank, (1999) quality is an attribute or characteristic of products and services offered by an organization. Quality assurance is a process aimed at achieving that attribute. The achievement of the desired result or attribute can be accomplished through quality control (inspection and removing faulty products) and quality assessment (monitoring, evaluation and auditing of procedures) all which are aspects of the quality management system (Commonwealth of Learning & Asian Development Bank, 1999).

There are minimum standards that ODL institutions should meet in order to roll out learning programmes (SADC, 2011). These include putting in place learner support systems and materials and a quality assurance unit to control and assess all the systems. If the minimum standards are not met, students are bound to have negative attitudes towards their programmes and biased perceptions of their institutions.

According to Kernerman Webster College Dictionary (2010), perceptions can be defined as cognition or awareness apprehended by means of the senses or the mind, or immediate or intuitive recognition or appreciation, as of moral, psychological, or aesthetic qualities. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1995) defines perception as an interpretation or impression based on one's understanding of something. Chiome, Chadamoyo and Chabaya (2011) investigated students' perceptions of service delivery at the ZOU Masvingo Regional Campus. They reported that students were not satisfied with the registration process, tutorials, library services, assignments management, overcrowded offices and communication. Although the study did not investigate students' perceptions on quality assurance in various programmes, it recommended that quality assurance steps be taken by the authorities to remedy the situation.

Students' or staff members' perceptions can be measured using a scale that reflects statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Green, 2010; Phiri & Mcwabe, 2013). Some researchers have used the 7 point Likert scale (Sharman et al., 1990 in Green, 2010) the 6 point scale or the common 5 point scale to measure perceptions and attitudes. The 5 point scale has been used to measure students' attitudes towards a curriculum (Udoukpong, Emah & Umoren, 2012). Perceptions (and attitudes) which are qualitative variables can be analysed qualitatively or quantitatively. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and t-tests which are quantitative measures can be used to determine differences and patterns in the respondents' perceptions The statistical packages such as EXCEL or SPSS have been used to analyse data on attitudes and/or perceptions (Sharman et al 1990 in Green 2010; Chirume, 2013).

Affective factors such as perceptions, attitudes, values and emotions are believed to play significant roles in learner achievement in mathematics (Chagwiza, Mutambara, Tatira & Nyaumwe, 2013), and indeed in other areas such as educational studies which also normally incorporate statistical courses. These affective factors are also critical for support of the quality management system. A study of staff and students' perceptions may shed light on how ODL programmes may be successfully implemented and sustained.

Pityana (n.d.) states that external quality assurance and assessment are essential for the success of an ODL institution. Firstly, the institution should be accredited as a service provider, then the programmes, courses, staffing systems etc. should be assessed. There should be rules for new courses and degree programmes across the system. The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) is responsible for the accreditation of all higher education institutions and has in place instruments for programme accreditation such as the criteria, ACCR 1A. ZOU also has in place procedures for design and development of programmes (ZQMS Proc 7.3.1). Whether ZOU staff members and students are fully aware of these procedures and whether they are being implemented is not clear.

4. DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study endeavours to investigate the perceptions of both students and staff members of ZOU (Midlands Region, Zimbabwe) regarding quality assurance in the departments of Mathematics and Statistics and Educational Studies. The research was delimited to the two programmes since these were easily accessible to the researchers. It was felt that research into these two departments would likely provide preliminary insight into the status of QMS in other departments. The study considers three areas namely; the overall quality management system, the ZOU registration process and the programme processes. The quality management system area consists of issues such as the complaints procedure, communication features, orientation and the availability of the quality assurance officers. The registration process considers issues such as the efficiency of the process, documentation used and the verification activities. The programme process looked at the quality of the teaching and learning in the programme.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions addressed by this research were:

(a) What are the perceptions of the students and tutors in the Educational Studies and Mathematics and Statistics departments regarding (i) the ZOU quality management, (ii) the registration process and (iii) the programme processes?

(b) How can these perceptions help the ZOU management to improve the quality in the departments?

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative methodology overally. However qualitative research was also used and this afforded the researchers the chance to relive the experiences of students. Some researchers who explored perceptions used the qualitative methodology (Chisaka, 2003, Tshabalala, 2013 & Bukaliya, 2011). In this study, questionnaires of the Likert scale type were used which consisted of five responses to each perception, namely: strongly agree; agree; undecided; disagree and strongly disagree. Some researchers used closed questionnaires of the Likert scale type to obtain perceptions with considerable success (eg. Chirume, 2013). Data were gathered by means of two closed questionnaires for both students

and tutors and focus group discussions were held with students only. In the analysis of data, the data sets were analysed using percentages and from focussed group discussions, emerging patterns and themes were noted (Merriam, 2009). The data gathering instruments are appendixed for reference.

The student population consisted of 53 students from the Department of Educational Studies and 9 students from the Department of Mathematics and Statistics showing a total population of 62 students for the two departments in the region. The tutor population consisted of 7 tutors from the Department of Mathematics and Statistics and 30 tutors from the Department of Educational Studies showing a total population of 37 tutors for the two departments in the region. The resultant sample consisted of 23 students showing a response rate of 37.1%. The tutors' sample was made up of 8 tutors with a response rate of 21.6%.

For questionnaires, convenient sampling was used for both tutors and students. In this case, both students and tutors were given questionnaires as they came to the Regional Centre to obtain various services. To cross check reliability of data obtained, methodology triangulation was employed through focussed group discussions.

7. FINDINGS

The findings were handled in three main areas, namely, responses of students to the questionnaire, responses of tutors to the questionnaire and focus group discussions with students. The variables for these three areas are shown in the relevant research instruments shown in Appendices A, B, and C. Strongly agree and Agree ratings were merged into Agree (A) while those for Strongly Disagree and Disagree were merged into Disagree (D). Ratings for Undecided (U) were left as they were. Percentages related to those students and tutors who formed the convenient samples alluded to in the foregoing section.

Student questionnaire

Table 1 showing overall students' responses to the questionnaire in %

	A	**D**	**U**
Quality management (8 items)	82.1	15.4	2.6
Student registration (9 items)	71.4	25.6	3.8
Programme processes (16 items)	77.9	15	7.1

Results from the questionnaire showed that 82.1% of the students were agreed overally that there was quality management system (QMS) in the two departments of the region. On the section on the quality management system, students responded positively in five of the eight issues namely: having a system for handling complaints (93.3%), attending to complaints (86.7%), the presence of a quality assurance officer (86.7%), the effectiveness of orientation (93.3%), communication of the quality management system (73.3%), the provision of an orientation package (73.3%) and correcting complaints timeously (66.7%). However, students were less emphatic on the issue of consulting the student advisor at least once per semester (60%).

On the section on the registration process 71.4% were in positive agreement with the quality of the registration processes associated with the two departments while 25.6% were in disagreement and 3.8% being undecided. Students were in positive agreement with five of the nine processes identified in the questionnaire. These included: efficient process (80%), registration forms easy to fill in (86.7%), assignments being given on registration (80%), registration documents being verified by the Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs) (100%) and registration documents being verified by the Regional Administrator (73.3%). Students were less emphatic on provision of tutorial letters (60%), advice on programme choice (60%) and library registration (53.3%). However students were in disagreement that all modules were provided on registration (60%).

On programme processes, 77.9% were in positive agreement with the quality of the programme processes associated with the two departments while 15% were in disagreement and 7.1% being undecided. Students were in emphatic agreement with the quality of thirteen of the sixteen processes identified in the questionnaire on this section. Issues such as tutorial supervision by RPCs (100%), making tutor evaluations (86.7%), thoroughness in marking of assignments (86.7%), moderation of marking by RPCs (93.3%), signing for submission (100%) and collection of assignments (80%), feedback on assignments during tutorials (73.3%), accessing the internet from the ICT laboratory (73.3%) and regular communication with the regional office about the programme (73.3%) were among processes endorsed by the students. Students were less emphatic on taking part in a quality audit (53.3%), and having regular communication with Students' Representative Council (SRC) (53.3%). However only 46.7% agreed that they obtained all the books they needed from the library.

The questionnaire also contained a question where respondents were required to air their personal views on the quality management system obtaining in the institution. A number of comments contained positive endorsement of the QMS. Other positive comments on the QMS were the availability of a platform to evaluate tutors during tutorials; the provision of a fees payment plan for those students with financial challenges as well as satisfaction with service provision by the majority of RPCs and tutors. However, the issue of the availability of all modules on registration was a matter of concern in a number of comments provided by the students. The following issues of concern were also raised: the need to improve the registration process; the need for provision of a calendar of events for the semester; dissatisfaction with some tutors who come ill-prepared for tutorials. Some also commented that they were not so sure that they understood the quality management system.

Tutor Questionnaire

The tutors who participated in the study were made up of two full time tutors and six part time tutors. In terms of qualifications, two had first degrees, three had Masters degrees and one had a doctorate. In terms of experience, one tutor had less than one year, one tutor had between one and five years experience while the six had over five years experience as tutors. Ratings on the tutors' questionnaire were analysed in the same manner as for the students' questionnaire though the specific items were different.

Table 2 showing tutors' overall responses to the questionnaire in %

	A	**D**	**U**
Quality Management (13 items)	50	31.4	18.6

Student registration (7 items)	49	22.4	28.6
Programme Processes (14 items)	55,9	29,7	14,4

Results from the questionnaire showed that 50% of the tutors were agreed overally that there was quality management system (QMS) in the two departments of the region while 31.4% disagreed and 18.6% were undecided. The tutors were in emphatic agreement with four of the thirteen QMS processes in this section of the questionnaire. These were as follows: the presence of a quality management system (75%), effectiveness of orientation (100%) and the provision of an orientation package to students (62.5%). Tutors were less emphatic in the following: awareness of the ZOU quality policy (50%), communication of the QMS (50%) and effectiveness of the communication (50%). Tutors did not agree to the following: awareness of the ISO 9001 QMS (50%), being involved in a quality audit (62.5%) and improvement of quality service due to audits (50%). Agreements with the processes were weak in the following: access to the ZOU quality policy (37.5%), awareness of the complaints procedure (37.5%) and effectiveness of the complaints procedure (37.5%).

On the section on the registration process only 49% were in positive agreement with the quality of the registration processes associated with the two departments while 22% were in disagreement and 28% being undecided. Tutors were in agreement with the following: that verification was fool proof (50%); students were given all their assignments (75%) and that students were given tutorial letters (50%). Tutors were not agreed on the following: correct capturing of student data (37.5%); that the registration process was efficient (37.5%) and students were given all their modules (25%).

On programme processes, 55.9% of the tutors were in positive agreement with the quality of the programme processes associated with the two departments while 29.7% were in disagreement and 14.4% being undecided. The tutors acknowledged the quality of nine of the 14 processes identified in this section of the questionnaire. These were as follows: timeous provision of courses on offer (100%); effective correction on defects on assignments (100%); effective peer evaluation (75%); effective supervision by RPCs during tutorials (75%); being skilled in e-tutoring (50%); adequate access to e-resources by students (62.5%); effective tutor evaluations by students and that all assignments are error-free (50%). Tutors were not agreed with the following: awareness on the procedures of the design of new courses (0%); effective correction of defects in modules (37.5%); and involvement in programme reviews (37.5%).

Tutors also provided personal opinions as regards the QMS in the two departments. Unlike comments provided by students much of the comments provided were centred on improving the system. A prominent suggestion was that there should be stronger thrust aimed at increasing awareness of the QMS to part time tutors and students. While tutors felt that both tutor and student evaluations during tutorials were an integral part of QMS, however there was need to make timeous and effective follow up on suggestions made in these evaluations. As part of the orientation package, it was opined that each student should be provided with a Communication and Academic Writing Skills module to enhance the quality of assignments produced. There were suggestions to the effect that part time tutors need to be involved more

in the QMS for it to be effective together with an enhancement of their working environment in the institution.

Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions were held with seven students doing Bachelor of Education Management (BEd Mgt) and twelve students doing Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The students who got engaged in the focus group discussions were not exactly the same as those who responded to questionnaires, hence, it was quite interesting to note considerable variations in perceptions on the same issues.

In the discussions, students intimated that they were not fully conversant with the vision and mission statement of the institution although they had seen the statement in the media, brochures, ZOU logo and on the letter heads. On awareness of the quality management system, both groups explained that they were not conversant with the system. They were also not aware of the roles of the Regional Quality Assurance Coordinator and the Student Advisor both of whom were key personnel in the quality management system of the institution. The discussants pointed out that the registration process was tiresome but acknowledged that filling in one form was now quite handy. One group were in agreement that the ZOU payment system was appropriate for assisting students with financial problems.

On tutorials, the two groups acknowledged that some of the tutors were very good and this was quite helpful especially towards examinations. However, the discussants were quick to observe that some tutors just read the modules showing poor preparation and lack of tutorial skills. One group also noted that six hours per course per semester was inadequate to cover all content in a module.

On the marking of coursework, the students pointed out that the period for receiving marked assignments was too long and this compromised feedback which was seen as relevant for tackling examination questions later. Both groups were in agreement that comments made in their assignments were helpful. However, it was on the management process where improvement was needed.

Both groups were asked to proffer suggestions for improving the ZOU quality management system. In order to improve communication and prevent victimisation, one group suggested that the use of the suggestion box was quite handy in this respect. There was also a request that examination timetables be sent by e-mail to students. It was also suggested that poor performing tutors be removed from the tutoring pool.

8. DISCUSSION

The discussion was centred on four main areas of the quality management system (QMS) as shown in the research sub problems. These areas include the ZOU quality management system, the registration process, the programme processes and improvement of the quality management system. Since both the qualitative and quantitative approaches were used, methodology triangulation was used to discuss the findings.

Quality Management System in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics and the Department of Educational Studies (Midlands Region)

On the overall rating of the presence of a quality management system, it was quite interesting to note that students (82.1%) had a far greater acknowledgement of the QMS than tutors at 50%. A possible scenario for such a status could be that since students are the direct recipients of service delivery, they were actually responding to their perceptions of the

service they practically received rather than an actual understanding of the concept of a QMS. Indeed Mishra (2007) maintains that students in higher education should be provided with opportunities to acquire the necessary knowledge about quality so that they can make appropriate decisions on the quality of education they desire. Taking into cognisance the fact that 50% of the tutors felt that the QMS was not communicated to them and a possible conjecture that tutors understand the conceptual framework of a QMS, it may become possible to see why tutors had a lower endorsement rate of the QMS than students. Ultimately awareness of QMS is a prerequisite for communal ownership and eventual acceptance of the quality system. Further analysis of the questionnaires did reveal that, unlike students, most of the tutors were unaware of the complaints procedure. This is an unfortunate scenario if one considers that the complaints procedure is a critical component of any well-meaning QMS.

Confirmation that the students might not have been conceptually cognisant of a QMS was revealed during focus group discussions where students emphatically denied an awareness of the quality system in the two departments under scrutiny. Further to that, in the discussions students also stated that they were not aware of the presence of both the quality assurance officer and the student advisor, yet these were key personnel in the QMS. Surprisingly, in the questionnaire 86.7% of the students had endorsed the existence of the quality assurance officer. Focus group discussions have the advantage of face to face interaction buttressed by in-depth discussions and clarifications.

Management of Quality in the Registration Process

In response to the questionnaire, students (71.4%) acknowledged that most of the registration processes were well executed. However, what emerged was that the provision of the full package of required modules was not adhered to since students had to visit the Regional Centre more than once to obtain outstanding modules. In focus group discussions, students pointed out that they preferred to be served under one roof to avoid a lengthy registration process. A similar study by Chabaya, Chadamoyo and Chiome (2011) for ZOU, Masvingo Region showed that 53.3% were not satisfied with the quality of the registration process, while 71.7% of the students were quite happy with module availability and distribution. Such a contradiction appears to show that the quality of ODL processes vary with the regional branches.

The perceptions of tutors on the quality of the registration process showed a marked difference from that of students. Tutors' endorsement of the quality of registration was a low at 49%. In fact, save for the provision of assignments and tutorial letters, most tutors had a pessimistic view on the quality of the registration process. The tutors' differences in perceptions with that of students were quite surprising considering that students were the primary recipients of service who would in turn inform their tutors of the nature of the quality of service provided; hence some congruence in perception was expected. Perhaps students relayed a different message to their tutors than to the researchers.

The Quality of the Programme Processes

It has already been seen that the majority of the students (77.9%) were generally satisfied with the overall quality of programme processes provided in the two departments of Mathematics and Statistics and Educational Studies. In fact for most processes such as marking, supervision by RPCs, submission of assignments and communication with Regional Office, the ratings on quality of service provision by students were quite high. In focus group discussions and open ended questions, students tended to raise more concerns than in

structured questionnaires when they pointed out that some tutors were in the habit of reading modules rather than discussing issues and concepts.

In comparison with the study by Chabaya, Chadamoyo and Chiome (2011), Masvingo Region students expressed dissatisfaction with weekend school tutorials at 43.5%, assignment management at 36.9%, communication at 42.4% and library services at 36.9%. Regional differences again crop up here.

Tutor perceptions on the quality of programme processes were similar but with a lower rating of 55.9%. It would appear that tutors had a greater sense of analysis when viewing programme processes, indeed, as they did for other areas of the quality in the two programmes. The issue of modules crept up again but tutors were concerned with slow pace in correcting defects found in the modules. Part-time tutors especially felt that their roles in improving quality could be deepened for example in areas such as programme reviews. This appears to be pertinent since they constitute the largest component in the teaching complement of the institution.

Improving the Quality Management System

Considerable comment was provided by both tutors and students on how the quality management system could be enhanced. Tutors came out strong on the need to communicate effectively the QMS to all stakeholders especially students and part-time staff. Indeed Belawarti and Zuhairi (2007) lend support to this view when they opine that quality assurance can only be effective when everyone in the organisation is fully aware and understands what happens. Consequently, a lower appreciation of the quality management system by part-time staff in this study could be a result of lack of knowledge of the QMS being implemented. A case in point on this issue relates to students' wish for more tutorial time to cover all content which is in stark variance to ZOU's philosophy of tutorship rather than lectureship. Evidently, an awareness framework on the desirability of tutorship in ODL needs to be crafted for both students and staff. All in all, a greater involvement by both full-time and part-time staff in both the implementation and improvement of the QMS would be immensely fruitful for the resultant service delivery.

For improvement in the quality of the registration process, the study found out that the inadequate provision of a full package of learning materials especially modules would need a greater thrust by the institution to implement an effective and coherent corrective action strategy. The commitment and provision of relevant resources be they material, financial or human becomes imperative for the realisation of intended benefits from the QMS. Strydom Zulu and Murray (2004) stress that the implementation of agreed changes do not just happen on their own but have to be led. They contend that an effective QMS needs the development of transformational academic leadership which demonstrates strong commitment to service excellence and academic citizenship. Overally then, managerial support for quality assurance processes and efforts is a must for a successful quality enhancement programme.

A variety of suggestions to improve the quality of programme processes were also proffered by both students and staff. Amongst the suggestions, it has already been seen that the following were key issues: improving assignment feedback turnaround time; improving tutorial skills; use of suggestion boxes in preventing victimisation for communication of sensitive issues by students; need for a strong awareness of the complaints procedure by both staff and students as well as timeous response to issues raised in tutorial evaluations by students. From the submissions by respondents in the study, it would appear that a key

ingredient for improvement lies in the development of a culture of quality by all concerned staff members and students in the two departments under study. A culture of quality is designed to accomplish one key objective – the improvement of programmes, services, and outcomes. It is therefore an institutional responsibility of the entire student, staff, tutor, and leadership of the institution. For Loukkola and Zhang (2010), two distinct elements underlie the conceptualisation of a quality culture namely: the cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment to quality and the structural/managerial element which consists of defined processes and procedures that coordinate quality at both the individual and organisational levels in the institution. For the two departments, values and beliefs associated with enhancing quality should of necessity pervade all departmental activities and processes at the individual, regional and national levels. The existence of a culture of quality in ODL institutions becomes imperative to overcome the regional differences alluded to earlier in the paper. Quality culture is also relevant in lessening institutional ignorance on the roles of various stakeholders in the QMS as revealed by this study.

9. CONCLUSION

Both students and staff members responded that a QMS existed in the institution, though perceptions by staff members showed a lower rating of its existence and effectiveness. A significant outcome of the study showed that a positive appraisal of the QMS was obtained through the student questionnaires while a negative portrayal emerged through focussed group discussions.

While both staff and students showed positive appreciation of the quality of the registration process, however it emerged that inadequate provision of modules hampered the registration process. It was also revealed that the process was time consuming.

While students showed a greater appreciation of the quality of the two programme processes, however, staff members were less appreciative of the quality. Students preferred the removal of poor performing staff at tutorials. Part-time staff, on the other hand desired a more active role in the processes of the two departments.

For improvement, effective awareness of the QMS needs to be carried out thoroughly and be extended to both students and part-time tutors. The study also revealed that the role of management was critical in supporting efforts targeted at improving the QMS. A culture of quality was seen as significant in pooling both individual and organisational efforts towards a common vision of the nature of quality to be realised in the institution.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

A strong emphasis should be laid on the total inclusion of all institutional stakeholders in the improvement and implementation of a robust quality management system leading to ownership and acceptance of the system. While management should provide strong leadership in maintaining focus, subordinates need to be given space to initiate and suggest ideas on how the QMS should eventually evolve.

A culture of quality needs to be developed by creating a conducive atmosphere for consolidating common values and beliefs about quality as well as collectively putting up organisational structures, processes and procedures that enhance quality. To create such a culture, all stakeholders, both internal and external, need to be involved in creating the QMS, in implementing it as well as evaluating the QMS.

Different research approaches such as a full survey of all ZOU regional centres and documentary analysis could be used to offset the challenges encountered in this study where there was notable variance in responses when utilising questionnaires and focus group discussions. In addition, research would also need to encompass all departments to see if there are notable differences with the current research where only two departments were sampled. Adequate time needs to be provided to ensure that the samples so chosen are sufficiently representative.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TUTORS

This questionnaire seeks to gather data from you for use as a research paper by the following Zimbabwe Open University researchers: Thondhlana, S., Chirume S. and Dick M.T. The questionnaire intends to find out your perceptions towards the quality assurance processes in the two departments of Mathematics and Statistics as well as Educational Studies. Feel free to respond to all the questions since the information obtained will not be used for any other purpose except research only. The information will be treated in strict confidence. Hence, do not write your name on the completed questionnaire.

SECTION A: GENERAL

1. What diplomas/degrees are you teaching/coordinating?

2. What is your status as a tutor? Full time □ Part time □

3. What is your experience as an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) tutor?

Below one year	1-5 years	6-10 years	Above 10 years

4. What is your gender status? Male □ Female □

5. State your professional qualifications.

First Degree	Masters' Degree	PH D	Any other qualifications. Specify
			.

SECTION B

Please tick where appropriate. Meaning of abbreviations: SD=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; U=Undecided; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

1. Quality Management System

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
There is a quality management system in ZOU.					
I am aware of the ZOU quality policy.					
I have easy access to the ZOU quality policy requirements.					
Awareness on the quality management system was made to me.					
The method of awareness was effective.					
ZOU is implementing an ISO 9001 Quality Management System (QMS).					
An awareness of ISO 9001 QMS was made to me.					
I was involved in a quality audit.					
The quality audits have improved quality of service.					
The ZOU quality policy has a complaints procedure.					
The complaints procedure is effective.					
Orientation is effective in providing students with institutional requirements.					
An orientation package is offered to students.					

2. Student Registration

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
I verify all student registration documents in my department.					
The verification process is fool proof.					
Students are given all their modules on registration.					
Students are given all their assignments on registration.					
Students are given tutorial letters on registration.					
The registration process is efficient for the students.					
Student registration data is correctly captured.					

3. Programme Processes

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
Courses on offer are provided timeously before the beginning of each semester.					
Modules are ready before each course is offered.					
All assignments to the region are error-free.					
The process for correcting defects in assignments is effective.					
The process for correcting defects in modules is effective.					
I am aware of the procedures for the design of new courses.					
I have been involved in the review of programme courses.					
The programme reviews have been implemented.					
Tutor evaluations by students during tutorials are effective					
Peer evaluations during tutorials are effective.					
Student pass rates are availed for semester evaluation.					
Supervision of tutorials by Regional Programme Coordinators is effective.					
Student access to e-resources is adequate.					
I am skilled in e-tutoring.					

4. Personal comments on the Quality Management System in the Programme

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……
……

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

This questionnaire seeks to gather data from you for use as a research paper by the following Zimbabwe Open University researchers: Thondhlana, S., Chirume S. and Dick M.T. The questionnaire intends to find out your perceptions towards the quality assurance processes in the two departments of Mathematics and Statistics as well as Educational Studies. Feel free to respond to all the questions since the information obtained will not be used for any other purpose except research only. The information will be treated in strict confidence. Hence, do not write your name on the completed questionnaire.

SECTION A: GENERAL

1. What diploma/degree are you studying?

.....

2. What is your current year of study?

.....

3. What is your gender status? Male □ Female □

4. State your age group in years.

17 years and below	18-20 years	21-30 years	31-40 years	41-50 years	Above 50 years

SECTION B

Please tick where appropriate. Meaning of abbreviations: SD=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; U=Undecided; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree

1. Quality Management System

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
There is a quality management officer.					
There is a system for handling complaints in the department.					
Complaints are attended to timeously.					
Complaints are corrected timeously.					
I have consulted the student advisor at least once.					
The quality management system was communicated to me.					
Orientation provides me with the requirements, expectations, regulations and standards of the institution					
An orientation package is provided.					

2. Student Registration Process

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
The process of registration is efficient.					
All modules are provided on registration.					
The registration forms are easy to fill.					
All assignments are given on registration.					
Tutorial letter for my programme is given.					
Registration documents are verified by the Regional					

Programme coordinator.					
Registration documents are verified by the Administration Officer.					
Advice on programme choice is given by the student advisor					
Library registration is carried out during the registration period.					

3. Programme processes

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
Tutorials are supervised by the Regional Programme Coordinators.					
The student advisor monitors tutorials.					
The quality assurance officer monitors quality of tutorials.					
I make regular tutor evaluations during tutorials.					
I was interviewed on quality of programme activities during a quality audit.					
Marking is thorough.					
Comments in marking are helpful.					
Marking is moderated by the Regional Programme Coordinator.					
I sign for handing in assignments.					
I sign when collecting marked assignments.					
Feedback on my marked assignments is given during tutorials.					
I obtain all the books I need in the library.					
I can easily access internet information from the ICT laboratory.					
The Regional Programme Coordinator attends to all my programme challenges professionally.					
There is regular communication about the programme issues between myself and the Regional Office.					
There is regular communication between myself and the Students' Representative Council.					

4. Personal comments on the quality management system in ZOU.

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APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

1. Are you aware of the ZOU vision and mission statement? State them.
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.....
2. Explain how you became aware of the vision and mission statement.
.....
.....
.....
3. How did you learn about ZOU's rules, regulations, standards and expectations in your programme? Name some of them.
.....
.....
.....
4. Are you aware of ZOU's quality management system? Describe the quality management system.
.....
.....
5. Describe the quality of service in the following areas:
a)Registration in your programme
.....
.....
b) Weekend tutorials
.....
.....
c) Library service
.....
.....
d) ICT laboratory service
.....
.....
e) Marking of coursework
.....
.....
f) Supervision of student projects
.....
.....
6. Describe ZOU's system for attending to student queries.
.....
.....
7. Describe the role of the student manager in your programme.
.....
.....
8. Describe the role of the regional quality assurance coordinator in your programme.
.....
.....
9. How can ZOU improve its quality assurance processes in your programme?